

I LOVE A REAL CHALLENGE BUT...
...THE TRUTH ABOUT CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT AT WORK
By DEREK DANN

This article is presented with the compliments of Consultation Limited for the personal use of its clients and visitors to its web site. For this piece, Derek Dann explores issues around challenging our people to increase their performance and how we support them in doing so.

You've probably heard something along these lines before: "I love a real challenge, believe me, but this is just too much for anyone to take on."

What's important for us to understand as managers is that there is a good deal of truth on both sides of the statement.

Yes, most people do like to be challenged to achieve greater things; it's part of what makes us get up in the morning, part of what drives us to go the extra mile; it's part of our humanity. And it's what McGregor's 'Theory Y'¹ tells us.

Yes, many people do find some of the challenges they are presented with to be somewhat beyond their comfort zone. That's part of who we are as individuals and we all need to be stretched beyond our comfort zone from time to time, just not all the time.

For many years now organisations have had to trim staff numbers in order to stay competitive or simply to more closely match their expenditure with their income. And in difficult times, staff and their associated costs are usually the first to come under the microscope; those of us who experienced the deep recession of 2008/2009 and predicted subsequent slow recovery will understand.

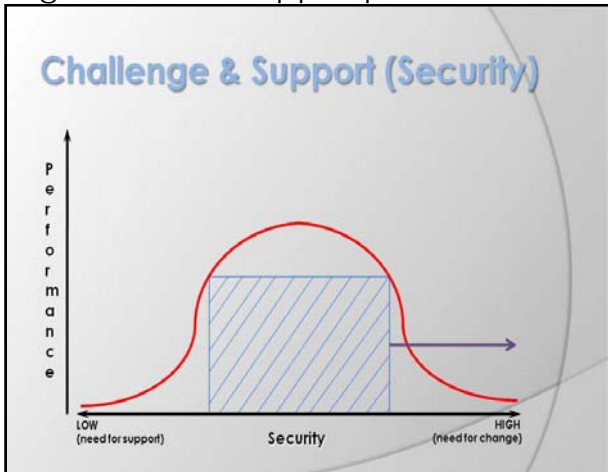
It's therefore inevitable that, as staff numbers are reduced, those that remain will have to fill the inevitable gaps that arise in capacity. We have to ask more of our people; but the problems all of us face as a result don't stop there.

Alongside this extra work challenge, there is inevitably fear:

- ◀ Can I do this?
- ◀ What will happen to me if I can't?
- ◀ How long until the next round of staff cuts?
- ◀ Can the organisation survive this serious downturn?
- ◀ Will I get recognised and be rewarded for the extra effort?

So it's important in such times that managers really understand the implications from the point of view of the individual experiencing them. All too often, managers expect others to react in the same way they do although in tough times, the reality often doesn't match the expectation. This is where it's important to step into the shoes of our staff, each one individually, so that we gain a real understanding of how they perceive the challenges we set them. A couple of models will help our understanding.

In this first model, we're looking at people's performance measured against their *own perceptions* of job security. It will come as no surprise that people perform best when their *perceived* job security is reasonably high, as in the upper part of the bell



curve.

The important point here is that their personal sense of security is based upon how *they* perceive their security, not how *anyone else* sees it. So as managers, we need to do everything we can to ensure that our staff have a clear understanding of their job security based on facts, not conjecture.

And here's the dilemma: to tell the truth and risk their leaving or to fudge the issue in order to hang on to them. It's your call but, in my experience, honesty is the best policy; dishonesty will always come back to plague you.

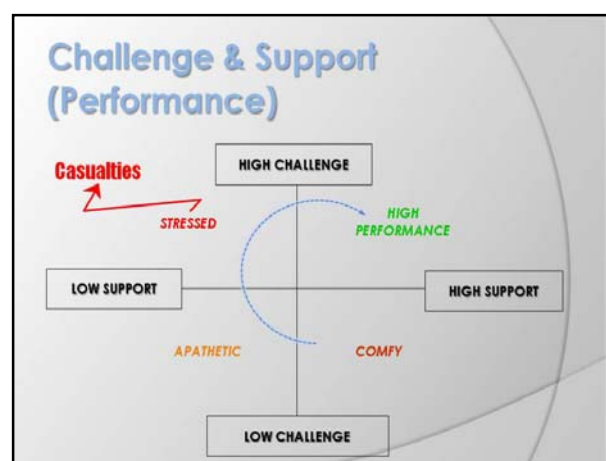
We can draw some important conclusions from the first model: The first is that, for a large part of the bell curve, e.g. within the boxed area, performance is much the same across a range of perceived security. Only at the extremes does performance really fall away. Secondly, and interestingly, a perception of very high levels of

support leads to a reduction in performance so that management effort to provide support in this area could be wasted.

The second model demonstrates a really interesting facet of challenge & support. Before continuing, it's important to reiterate that, as managers, we need to be clear that whether a person is highly challenged or not, and whether they receive high levels of support or not, staff performance is dependent upon staff perceptions, not our own views of their situation.

So what does this model tell us? In each quadrant there is a general descriptor about how someone might feel about their levels of challenge and the amount of support they receive. For example, in the lower right quadrant of perceived low challenge and high support, people are likely to feel 'comfy'; wouldn't you?

So let's imagine you decide that Fiona Gruntfuttock (one of your comfy



employees) needs to lift her game and move into the high performance area; after all, that's where you want all of your staff to be, isn't it? To do that, you'll need to maintain high

levels of support and raise the levels of challenge towards high.

But as you raise the levels of challenge, Fiona's *perceptions* of the level of support she's receiving are likely to fall, even if you have developed good communications between you and her. She could well feel low but rising challenge along with lowering support so that she moves into the 'apathy' quadrant. And as the degree of challenge begins to move into the high quadrant, she'll feel greater pressure and she'll feel stressed. It's at this point that casualties can occur; people fall by the wayside because they sense that they have high challenge and low support (it's all in the mind), unless we as managers demonstrate or convince them otherwise. Those who understand the process may well move into the top right quadrant of high challenge and high support. The cyclic path shown by the dotted blue line is the route invariably taken when managers try to 'up the games' of their people. Yet, whilst most people will follow that path, they don't have to become casualties; as managers, we can nurse our people through the transition to increased performance. It's also important to remember that this cycle doesn't apply only to those in the 'comfy' quadrant, it can start in any quadrant and cycle along the path indicated by the blue dotted line; and it can continue on in a circular loop.

So how do we go about managing challenge and support within our own organisations?

THE 'HOW TO'

First, it's about communication. As managers, we need to be

communicating effectively with our people so that they fully understand the situation and what might happen to them as they raise the bar to meet our requirements. Whilst this may be part of a formal performance management process, it should also take place on a more casual basis. It's no good addressing performance issues just once or twice a year as part of the formal appraisal process; we have to be keeping an eye open for potential or actual challenge and support issues all of the time and chatting about them. This less formal process is more effective because it's perceived as a more human approach, as a less 'manufactured' process.

So it's about communication. And it's also about motivation. We'll look at that in more detail in another article but, for the moment, bear in mind that what motivates one person may not be the main driver for another. And, surprisingly often, money is not the primary motivator.

IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT THE 'HOW TO'

Performance improvement is not just about *what* we managers and our people *do*; it is most emphatically also about *who* we (and they) *are*. It's all about the relationships we have with our individual members of staff. Where mutual trust exists, both parties will find it easier to manage the process of challenge and support effectively.

How we go about developing such trust is complex and requires a significant investment in time and effort. Yet such investment always pays dividends in staff loyalty and commitment. And it enriches everyone's lives. We can look more closely at this in another article on

Emotional Intelligence but you can also see other articles here on the subject of trust.

So, in summary, as managers, we need to ensure that we are communicating effectively and motivating appropriately whilst building mutual trust. When all of that is authentically in place, our people will bring all of themselves to the workplace rather than leaving half of their capabilities at the doorway.

If you're not sure where you stand with your members of staff, just ask one simple question of yourself: "Do I know what each one gets up to in their spare time"? If you do, the chances are that you have true connection with them, If you don't, then you need to be raising *your* game for *them*.

It's never too late to begin the process, is it?

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ⁱ Find out more about McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y at <http://www.businessballs.com/mcgregor.htm>